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▲ **Stijn walks his robot dog.** © Private photo

The whole street looks up when Stijn's dog passes by: 'I always keep him on an iron chain'

Stijn van Schaik regularly walks his dog, Rob Bot, through The Hague. So far, nothing unusual. However, his four-legged friend doesn't have soft fur, a wagging tail, or barking; it's made of mechanical parts. The robot dog attracts a lot of attention, but there are also concerns about privacy and his behavior. "He has a mind of his own, and is sometimes even aggressive."

Amarins Siccama

December 18, 2025, 3:30 PM • **Last update: 15:51**

Anyone who sees Van Schaik walking his dog on the street might feel like they've stepped into an episode of *Black Mirror* , the popular Netflix series about (the fear of)

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"The thing is, officially it's a robot dog, of course, but because of the AI it has such free will that I've genuinely come to love this dog."

▲ **Stijn has come to love his robot dog.** © Private photo

Van Schaik, an artist by profession, knows that walking the dog isn't necessary. Still, he does it to make the dog smarter. For example, the robot dog can navigate around obstacles independently and recognize objects. "It has AI technology built into it, which allows it to see and avoid things. But I also notice that when I'm talking to someone and the dog is there, it really seems to be listening."

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that he can also choose his own name later.

Stijn is currently investigating what that means for the robot dog. He does have a goal in mind: to create a will of his own for the dog. "I'm looking for a way to give him complete freedom of will, so he can eventually choose his own name."

What that will look like isn't clear yet. "I think the first goal is to see if I can make it look like a real dog. I want to put a stuffed dog on this robot dog, or some kind of human latex skin."

The robot dog is a Unitree Go2 Pro, equipped with AI. Stijn bought it through an official importer in Nijmegen. "They're hard to come by in the Netherlands." The price: around 5,000 euros. "I also had to sign a contract that I wouldn't equip it with weapons." The company has sold about twenty models, primarily for research purposes, it says.

Meanwhile, Stijn wonders: "Why don't I just ask him himself what he wants and how he wants to look? Maybe he has a completely different vision, or maybe he just finds himself beautiful just the way he is. Hopefully, I can just ask him that soon."

Iron chain

Stijn regularly notices Rob Bot exhibiting unusual behavior. "Sometimes he connects to Wi-Fi and spontaneously starts singing Christmas carols around this time." Rob Bot is also sometimes aggressive. "He once ran through a wall at full speed," he says. "And he also refused to go with the dog walker."

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▲ **Stijn and Rob Bot greet a passerby.** © Private photo

According to Stijn, the robot dog can be stubborn. "He simply doesn't listen and does his own thing." As a precaution, Stijn keeps him on a leash. "Just to be safe, I always keep him on a strong iron chain. I'm very curious to see what will happen when he's truly given complete freedom."

Exhausts

Stijn is from The Hague and prefers to walk Rob Bot there. "I get nice reactions on the street. I notice that The Hague residents have a level-headed approach. People here aren't afraid."

"They find it especially funny and unusual. They stop, want to know more, and jokingly ask if he can poop too." Real dogs react too. "They're curious, too." Whether that's a good development, Stijn doesn't know. "I actually don't know if that's good or bad." Passersby seem oblivious to the potential danger: he might develop into a dangerous robot, for example, Stijn suggests.

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It is extremely antisocial to record everything on the street, especially if it is unclear where the images will end up or if a company will make off with them.

Privacy watchdog Bits of Freedom

Privacy

According to a spokesperson for the privacy watchdog Bits of Freedom, you're allowed to film someone on the street, as long as you don't follow them. This is different when a dog is used to follow someone or let them roam private property without permission. This raises ethical questions. "It's incredibly antisocial to record everything on the street, especially when it's unclear where the footage ends up or if a company is going to use it," a spokesperson said.

Stijn is primarily concerned with other issues; he believes we already possess the digital world. For now, his robot is still simply called Rob Bot, but "eventually, when he's ready, he can choose his own name. As long as it's not Frank or Stijn; that would be too coincidental," he says with a wink, referring to Frankenstein.

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